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Belisario Betancur, 95, Colombia President During Rebel Siege, Dies

By Stephen Kinzer

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Belisario Betancur, a Colombian president in the 1980s whose efforts to end a guerrilla war in his country were undermined by a spectacular rebel attack on the Palace of Justice in Bogotá that led to more than 100 deaths, died on Friday in a hospital in Bogotá. He was 95.

His death was announced by the hospital, Fundacion Santa Fe de Bogotá.

Mr. Betancur (pronounced bet-an-CUR) was an unusual figure in Colombian politics. He came from a working-class family in the provinces, rather than from the Bogotá elite. During the period of dictatorship in the 1950s, he was repeatedly jailed on political charges.

Mr. Betancur failed to win the presidency three times before succeeding in 1982. In office, he introduced programs that provided low-cost housing and education, a successful literacy campaign and other reforms. He ceaselessly promoted peace initiatives, both at home and abroad.

“His legacy in politics, in our history, in culture is an example for all future generations,” President Ivan Duque tweeted.

Mr. Betancur was soft-spoken, well read and unabashedly devoted to the life of the mind. He spent much of his career, both before and after his presidency, as an author, journalist and professor. His books ranged across politics, economics, sociology and education.



Government employees were led from the Palace of Justice in Bogota on Nov. 7, 1985, after an army assault on the building set free more than 100 people held hostage there by leftist guerrillas. The attack undermined Mr. Betancur's efforts to end the insurgency.
Carlos Gonzalez/Associated Press

“In reality he was not a government leader who loved poetry,” Colombia’s leading writer, the Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, once said of him. “He was a poet on whom fate imposed the penance of power.”

The biggest crisis of his presidency came in November 1985, as he was approaching the end of his term. A squad of guerrillas from the leftist M-19 group stormed the Palace of Justice “in the name of peace and justice.” They took 300 hostages, including most members of Colombia’s two highest courts, and demanded that Mr. Betancur present himself for trial for violating a peace accord reached with the rebels. He refused, declining to take calls from the captured president of the Supreme Court and rejecting offers to negotiate with the guerrillas. Military forces stormed the building, and more than 100 people were killed.

Until the end of his life, Mr. Betancur was dogged by charges that he shared responsibility for the deaths. Relatives of victims sought his indictment. He testified at several investigations, and in 2012 declared “my permanent willingness and desire to continue testifying before competent authorities, as often as necessary.”

Belisario Betancur Cuartas was born on Feb. 4, 1923, in the town of Amagá, in Colombia’s rural northeast. His father was a laborer, and his mother ran a small shop. He was one of 21 siblings, five of whom survived.

Mr. Betancur joined the Conservative Party and began his career as a legislator in his home state, Antioquia. From there he graduated to national politics, becoming minister of labor in 1963. By then he was also director of a publishing house he founded, called Third World. He served as ambassador to Spain from 1975 to 1977.

Colombia faced serious economic trouble and a raging guerrilla war when Mr. Betancur was elected president, and he sought negotiations with rebel groups. Eager to promote peace in the region, he joined with several other presidents to found the Contadora Group, which produced plans that ultimately helped end civil wars in Central America.

Mr. Betancur’s life and legacy were dramatically changed by the guerrilla assault on the Palace of Justice that began at midday on Nov. 6, 1985. It ended in a conflagration that destroyed the building. Twelve Supreme Court judges were among the dead. Mr. Betancur appeared on television to assume responsibility for what he called a “terrible nightmare.”

Some aspects of the episode remain unclear, but investigators have suggested that the guerrillas may have been acting in concert with drug traffickers. The Supreme Court was about to rule on a law permitting the extradition of drug suspects to the United States. By some accounts the guerrillas took special care to destroy records of drug cases, including those involving Pablo Escobar, the murderous head of a cocaine cartel who would be killed by security forces in 1993.

Two retired military officers were later sentenced to prison in connection with the killing of guerrillas and others who were captured during or after the Palace of Justice assault. No charges were ever brought against Mr. Betancur, who was prohibited from running for a second consecutive term under the Constitution.

Mr. Betancur's first wife, Rosa Helena Álvarez Yepes, died in 1998. They had three children, Beatriz, Diego and María Clara. He later married Dalia Rafaela Navarro Palmar. There was no immediate word on his survivors.

In his post-presidential years, Mr. Betancur remained active in global affairs. He headed a truth commission that investigated human rights abuses in El Salvador, became a senior official in the Club of Rome, an international research group, and served as president of the Pan American Health Organization.

After Juan Manuel Santos became president of Colombia in 2010, his first social call was made to Mr. Betancur. This was widely interpreted as a show of confidence in Mr. Betancur's integrity.

"Betancur was a rather Shakespearean figure," June Carolyn Erlick, an American journalist and editor who has written extensively about Colombia, said in an email. "He was a passionate social reformer, and he dared to talk about negotiating with the guerrillas in a polarized Cold War environment. Unfortunately all of those achievements tumbled into oblivion a few months before he left office. Betancur is now sadly remembered as presiding over one of Colombia's worst tragedies, rather than as a statesman promoting peace and negotiations."

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